

FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL TO COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

by

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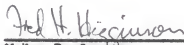
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FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL TO COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

The origin and embryology of human speech are wrapped in mystery. All we know is that the first feeble sounds which broke forth from Adam have come down to us from ear to ear, the open gateway to the soul, and the fatal sequence of that inexhaustible voice reverberating down the ages is the bond of solidarity which unites us in one continuous humanity. Adam's pioneering work in this field, his naming of the animals, has earned him a permanent niche in the science of linguistic investigation.

—Noah Jonathan Jacobs, Naming-Day in Eden (1958)¹

"The origin and embryology of human speech" are indeed "wrapped in mystery" and may well be so as long as man searches for the missing link between himself and the animals. But the effort to trace speech to its origins had led many an English linguist astray in the century and a half before Mr. Jacobs' time. In 1873, A. J. Ellis had felt called upon, in his capacity as president of the Philological Society, to instruct philologists to deal with actualities and not with speculations on the ultimate origins of language.²

Part of the philosophical speculation that was being produced at that time was the result of a long conflict between those who held a divine theory of the origin and diversification of languages (the Tower of Babel theory) and those who postulated a human origin and natural growth of languages. This conflict was, if not so well-known, at least as confusing and as hotly debated within its own sphere as that over the origin and diversification of biological species. In fact, the speculation in the linguistic

¹New York, p. xi

²"President's Annual Address," Philological Society Transactions, p. 252.

field was eventually to be used by Darwin and to support and be amplified by the application of Darwinian concepts. But, before such a correlation was made possible by the publication of the Origin of the Species in 1859, philological theories had been developing on their own and had confronted "revealed religion" with a possibility of man's invention of language.

After the Egyptian hieroglyphics were understood and after Sanskrit had been discovered and was being studied, it was no longer possible to hold the orthodox view that Hebrew was the original language--at least it was not possible to those who knew anything about philological study. But the nineteenth-century students of language were still hampered, until about 1860 or 1870, by the old assumptions that all the stories of the Bible were factual accounts--that Adam was created with fully-developed powers, that Moses had actually written the Pentateuch upon inspiration from God, and that the Tower of Babel had actually been a place where all the descendants of Noah met, speaking "one language" (Gen. 11:1) until they were dispersed by an angry God. Any theory about language which discounted these beliefs was rejected by most English divines--and therefore by most students of language since most of the philologists were connected with the church or sponsored by a church society.³

The debate between those of the theological persuasion and those who believed in a human origin of language, therefore arrived in England at a rather late date from Germany and the continent. When a full-fledged debate had finally developed, it was accompanied by two other developments

³See Andrew D. White, A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, (New York, 1900), II, p. 189 for a discussion of the connection of the ministers of the church with language study in England.

which brought the debate to a head quickly and disposed of the old Tower of Babel theory in short order.

One of these was the previously-mentioned work by Darwin. The other was the appearance in England of Biblical "higher criticism," most obviously in the works of William Colenso starting in 1862 and in the collection Essays and Reviews (1860).⁴ With both these forces brought to bear, those who wished to found linguistics upon a basis of natural origin and development definitely had the way cleared for them. They could correlate their theories with Darwin's and they could point out that the Bible should not be taken literally in matters where it conflicted with known scientific and historical facts.

So Mr. Jacobs' statement, however anachronous it may be in the twentieth century would not have been much out of place in 1858 (except perhaps for the use of the word embryology). In fact, his assertion of a Biblical truth would have been welcomed by some divines who were even then being beset by the "scientists." But only a few years later, by 1870, his work probably would have been considered reactionary by most philologists--even those who preceded their names with "The Reverend."

⁴For a relatively complete account of Colenso's inauguration of "higher criticisms" into England see T. K. Cheyne, Founders of Old Testament Criticism (London, 1893), pp. 196-204. Cf. White, pp. 349-357. For the Essays and Reviews controversy see White, pp. 343-348.

I. The Tower of Babel and Written Languages

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were certain assumptions which many of those who were studying philology were to make concerning the Biblical accounts of language; but one important step had already been taken--most reputable philologists were agreed that Hebrew was not the original language. In the second edition (1780) of the Encyclopedia Britannica article "Philology," the author thought himself free to declare that "There are some divines who pretend that Hebrew was the language in which God talked with Adam in paradise and that the saints will make use of it in heaven in those praises which they will eternally offer to the almighty. These doctors seem to be as certain in regard to what is past as to what is to come."⁵ Evidently he should not have been so free with the divines because the article in subsequent editions was much modified until well into the nineteenth century, but the indication was that the idea of Hebrew as the primeval language was on its way out of serious consideration.

At least in 1823 Gilbert Gerard could review the conflicting opinions with some freedom: "Some have thought that the primitive language is wholly lost; others that it still exists, and that Hebrew is that language. The truth seems to be, that in one sense it is lost, all the languages now known differing from it in many respects; but in another sense it still exists, to wit, in the several dialects derived from it, all which retain something of

⁵Cited by White, Warfare, II, p. 192. White reported (pp. 192-193) that the third ed. (1797) discarded this article and gave a fairly orthodox argument for both sides which was repeated in the fourth and fifth eds. The 1824 supplement had scarcely a reference to the Biblical theory. In the 1827 supplement the article on philology was omitted altogether. The seventh ed. (1824) had the supernatural element mainly cut out, but there was a footnote from the publishers disavowing any departure from the orthodox view. The 1859 ed. gave a history of philology relatively free of the scriptural doctrine.

it.⁶ But traces of sentiment on the side of Hebrew being the original language were still to be found in sermons far into the nineteenth century,⁷ and there were studies of philology which also held the orthodox opinion on that score.⁸ These, however, were relatively rare late into the century.

One man's successive views on the matter show the progression of thought. Adam Clarke had announced in his inaugural address to the Manchester Philological Society in 1804 that "he who rejects the establishment of what we believe divine"⁹ would not be accepted into the Society. He meant the acceptance of Hebrew as the original language, as he reiterated in 1834: "the proper names and other significations given in the Scripture seem incontestable evidence that the Hebrew language was the original language of the earth, the language in which God spoke to man, and in which he gave the revelation of his will to Moses and the prophets."¹⁰ But Clarke was forced to admit later that there was no satisfactory information on the point of Hebrew being the original language.¹¹

⁶Institutes of Biblical Criticism, Lectures read in the University and King's Colleges of Aberdeen (Boston, 1823), p. 241.

⁷As late as 1885, William Galloway said: "Jehovah wrote these first two documents; the first containing the history of the Creation, and the second the revelation of man's redemption . . . for Adam's and Eve's instruction; it is evident that he wrote them in the Hebrew tongue because that was the language of Adam and Eve." Cited by White, p. 203 from Philosophy of the Creation (Edinburgh and London, 1885), p. 238.

⁸See J. W. G. Gyll, Treatise on Language (London, 1859), p. 172 for a definite statement to this effect. B. W. Dwight, Modern Philology (New York, 1860), p. 197-198, hedges on a direct statement.

⁹This and other citations from Clarke are from White, p. 198. The sermon is printed in Miscellaneous Works (London, 1837).

¹⁰From Commentary (London, 1836), I, p. 93.

¹¹See "Origin of Language and Alphabetical Characters," Methodist Magazine, XV, p. 214.

With the idea of Hebrew as the original language having been discarded, there was not, however, a complete abandonment of ideas about the divine origin of language. Most of those who studied language held the orthodox views about the literal truth of the Bible. This meant that in the area of language development they had to account for the fact that God spoke to Adam in a language he understood, that Adam named the animals, that Moses received the ten commandments written by the finger of God, and that the one original language which Adam had was retained through the deluge until it was divided into several languages or dialects at the Tower of Babel. Taken together, these views meant, therefore, that there had certainly been one original language and that it had been divided only at the Tower of Babel, not more than 6000 years ago. Some were divided on the other implications. It was undecided whether God had directly given language to Adam or whether Adam had invented language. Some others believed that Hebrew originated with Moses through God's dictation at Mt. Sinai.

For most who were to accept the fact that Hebrew was not the original language, it was easy to see that the Bible nowhere said that such was the case. These easily accepted the substitute notion that Hebrew was, then, simply a cognate of the original language, other cognates being Egyptian and Assyrian (or Babylonian, the difference in these languages being unknown early in the century). It was even easier to believe in such a connection when it was found that, in fact, these languages were all traceable to a single alphabetic source--from which phonetic alphabets had developed.

Nearly all the theorists on language were convinced that there was one language from which these others had developed and that it should be possible to trace back to that original. Even Sir William Jones, the Sanskrit scholar and one of the most progressive thinkers in the field believed that

it should be possible to trace all languages back to the original, but he claimed in 1809 that it was impossible to find that original: "I can only declare my belief that the language of Noah is irretrievably lost. After diligent search, I can not find a single word used in common by the Arabian, Indian, and Tartar families, before the inter-mixture of dialects occasioned by the Mohammedan conquests."¹² But, as we have seen, Gerard was sure that it still existed in "dialects derived from it, all of which retain something of it."¹³

The idea that the primeval language still existed through some of the dialects arising from it was enough to cause Forster to write three volumes to prove that the Egyptian, Sinaitic, and Assyrian languages were, in fact, near enough alike to have originally been derived directly from the primitive language.¹⁴ Such theories as his were based upon the supposed nearness of the alphabets to one another; they took no account of the possible differences in the spoken languages.

Upon the question of the origin of the various alphabets, there was considerable debate, however much most assumed that there had been only one division of languages at Babel. As early as 1784 Thomas Astel, Keeper of the Records of the Tower of London demonstrated through close reading of the Bible that Moses had not received alphabetic writing from God in any manner. He pointed out that "The first mention of writing recorded in scripture, will be found in Exodus xvii, v.14: 'And the Lord said unto

¹²Works (London, 1807), I, p. 199. Cited by White, p. 194.

¹³See above, n. 6, p. 5.

¹⁴The Rev. Charles Forster, One Primeval Language, 3 vols. (London, 1851-1854).

Moses, write this, for a memorial, in a book and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua. . . . Moses understood what he meant by writing in a book.¹⁵ Astle's theory of the origin of the alphabet was that it had developed gradually from "picture-writing," e.g. hieroglyphics: "It is not probable that the art of picture-writing was brought to any degree of perfection by one man or nation, or even by one generation; but was gradually improved and extended. . . . This transition to arbitrary signs was not so great as at first may appear. In all probability these signs were introduced slowly, and by degrees, and in such manner as to be always explained by the context, until generally known and adopted."¹⁶

Such a theory as Astle's was, however, far too advanced for the general consumption among philologists at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gerard indicated that the subject was often open to debate: "The invention of alphabetical writing has always been, with reason, considered as a very great effort of human genius. Whether it was wholly owing to that, or partly also to a divine original? Who was the author of it? Whether Adam, or Abraham, or Moses, or the Assyrians, or the Phoenicians, or the Egyptians?—are questions which have been moved, but which cannot, perhaps, be answered with any degree of certainty."¹⁷

However, those who maintained that alphabetic writing was God-given had the upper hand in the controversy. They could maintain that alphabetic writing was an impossible invention for unaided human intelligence; and

¹⁵The Origin and Progress of Writings, as Well Hieroglyphic as Elementary (London, 1784), p. 28.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Biblical Criticism, p. 28.

furthermore, they could consider Hebrew to have been that God-given language and thereby salvage some of the old feeling that Hebrew was a divine and nearly-perfect language. Such a one was the Reverend Charles William Wall who published in his Examination of the Ancient Orthography of the Jews¹⁸ his own reasons for believing that the alphabet could not have been invented or even gradually applied by man; but must have had a divine origin.

Wall first attempted to show--through "logic," a discursive on human nature, and the repudiation of what Champollion had to say about the Rosetta stone¹² that the Egyptians could not possibly have invented a true phonetic alphabet; though they were able to develop the hieroglyphic picture-writing. He claimed that the impossibility of human invention of the alphabet had been proved by three particular "facts": 1. The American Indians would have developed an alphabet if human nature had given them the capability; 2. The Chinese had the time and the same cultural background as did the Egyptians, yet did not develop a phonetic alphabet; 3. The Egyptians did not invent a phonetic alphabet, but adopted one from another source, presumably the Greek.

His conclusion from these "facts" was that

The Egyptian case then, as well as any others that is known, accord with the general argument which has been urged against the discovery of man of any alphabet whatever, and abstract reasoning on the subject is borne out and sustained by an induction of particulars. . . . But, though it is quite immaterial to the question at present before me, by what people the Egyptians were taught

¹⁸ An Inquiry into the Origin of Alphabetic Writing, in Examination, I (London, 1835)

¹⁹ Champollion had published his discoveries of the development of a phonetic alphabet in Egypt, in France in 1822 and 1824. See Holger Pederson, The Discovery of Language, John Webster Spargo, trans. (Bloomington, Ind., 1962), pp. 174-175

their phonetic use of signs; yet if it could be proved that in all probability they learned it from the Greeks, and at the same time shown that there was no foundation whatever for the arguments bearing the opposite way; then the indirect attack on the historic truth of the Bible, which has been derived from Egyptian records, would entirely fall to the ground (p. 114).

Therefore, since no people had a real alphabet before the time that Moses received the ten commandments and since Moses did not record anything as being written before the Sinai event, the writing of the ten commandments by Moses in his own hand must have been the first instance of true writing. Wall's concise statement of the reason for his supposing further that such writing was alphabetic demonstrates the kind of reasoning used by "philologists" of his ilk: "Now I take it for granted, that this miraculous writing was not inferior to the kind Moses afterwards employed in transmitting to us the sacred history, and therefore that it must have been alphabetic." (p. 333)

Wall evidently had felt called upon to write such a defense of the divine origin of the alphabet to prove M. Champollion's translations false, for "this writer endeavored to sap the foundation of religious beliefs, by attacking the historic truth of the Bible; for he pretended to establish, through means of his phonetic system, the correctness of a chronicle which is a variance with the account deducible from the Mosaic record, by at least three thousand five hundred years" (p. 85).²⁰

In the early part of the nineteenth century, then, the question for the defender of revealed religion was one of the written record--the Bible or the Rosetta stone? Those who opposed the concept of the divine origin of the alphabet could assume only one other possibility--that man had invented

²⁰Champollion was definitely under attack in England. Cf. Forster, Primeval Lang., II, p. 5: "and every wild theorist from the savans of the French expedition to the savans of the present day, may set up his own chronology, and make the world, at will, 7000 or 70000 years old."

a phonetic alphabet. The possibility of gradual development from a system like the hieroglyphs was impossible because of the lack of time allowed by the "Mosaic accounts."

Few were as yet concerned with discussing the spoken language rather than the written languages. Little could be proved in that area and the Tower of Babel story was definite in its direct statement, unlike the story of the creation of Adam, or the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Even Astle, who had postulated the natural development of the alphabet, believed in the literal interpretation of the Tower of Babel incident.

Wall said that from the point of view that the alphabet breaks down the spoken language into parts which can be analyzed "it directly follows, that Hebrew can not be entirely the same language as that which was first spoken by man. . . . If Hebrew had been the language of the ante-diluvian world, the subsidiary parts of the words serving the purposes of their inflexion would have been completely blended . . . long before the time of Moses" (p. 377). Since Hebrew was not the same language that had been the original, and since it was the language which Moses used, Wall had the proof he needed: "Here then is presented to us, derived from internal evidence, a very decisive proof of some miraculous interference with language having actually taken place, fully compatible, in point of date, with that which is recorded in the Bible." (p. 378)

Wall had not had access to much study of the Assyrian language which was just being translated and evaluated when he published his book. If he had known about them, he might have written Forster's One Primeval Language. As it was, Forster felt called upon to write in defense of the Tower of Babel and all its accumulating significance. In doing so, he dealt, like

Wall, with the Egyptian problem, and in a similar manner. But he also had to account for the few Assyrian discoveries that had been made and he chose to debate a unique problem--that of the significance of the Sinaitic inscriptions.

Forster's method of interpretation for all three of these languages was to assume a harmony of alphabets whereby "in the oldest alphabets of the world, compared between themselves, identity of form in the characters implies identity of power, from their common nearness to the parent source." (I, pp. xiii-xiv). With such a principle, Forster felt able to make his own translations of the Egyptian alphabetic scripts, the Assyrian cuneiforms and the Sinaitic inscriptions. He discarded Champollion's work on the Egyptian, Rawlinson's on the Assyrian, and Beers' on the Sinaitic inscriptions in order to make his own translation--which agreed with the preconceived notions he had hoped to find there.

His first project was to find proof in the Sinaitic inscriptions that they were made by the Jews on their way out of Egypt. These Sinaitic inscriptions had been brought into prominence by Dr. E. F. F. Beers of Leipzig. He had published his account of the alphabet in 1840-1843 (Inscriptiones veteres litteris huc usque incognitis ad Montem Sinai servatae) and Professor Tuch had concluded (1840, Zeitschrift d. Deutsch. Morgenl. Gesellsch.) that they were the language of the ancient Amalekites and others of the Bedouins in the Sinaitic peninsula. By 1848, Beers and others had deciphered them as belonging to the second and third century A. D. and as being a probable progenitor of the Kufic Arabic alphabet.²¹ Forster disagreed with

²¹ See Encyclopedia Britannica, 8th ed., XVII, P. 535. J. W. Donaldson in the "Philology" article gives the information known by 1859.

these interpretations and made a surprisingly accurate connection between them and the Egyptian alphabetic writings.²² But he was not content to rest his case on linguistic similarities. His own translations of the inscriptions proved, to his own satisfaction, that the Biblical account of the Jews in the wilderness could be found there, recorded as they happened.

In volume two, Forster also provided his own translations of the Egyptian alphabetic writing (the hieroglyphs were mere pictures or illustrations and not true writing at all, cf. Wall, above, p. 9). This task he undertook because he too considered the "Egyptologists," and particularly Champollion, dangerous: "The attempts formerly made to convert Egypt and her monuments into the stronghold of infidelity, and recently renewed, in a less daring indeed but not less dangerous form, seem to call upon all who take a serious interest in the cause of revealed truth, to enter, with the author, upon the inquiry into the real state and merits of the case." (II, p. iv) Forster was vindicated in his pursuit. He found that the Egyptian writings contained such marvelous things as an account of the Garden of Eden complete with pomegranate tree and snake (p. 181f.) To his proofs from Sinai he had thus added proofs from Egypt that such accounts as were found in the Bible were true; for the Hebrew people had evidently written these, or at least taught them to the Egyptians.

Forster had one more step to take in his quest for the One Primeval Language: "The stage of the general subject at which we have now arrived, reconducts us, from Sinai and Egypt, to a still more ancient scene--'the plain of Shinar;' to the spot where that judgment from Heaven was inflicted,

²²Pedersen, Discovery, p. 183, says that Gardiner made a similar connection in 1916 between the Sinaitic and the Egyptian writings.

which first broke the unity of speech and, by necessary consequence, that of the human family." (III, p. 8) In order to equate all of these languages he had to postulate the hypothesis that the division of languages at the Tower of Babel was not radical, but dialectical. Such a proposition was based upon three sources: 1. Philo Judeaus' statement that mankind "paid the fit penalty of their daring, for they presently became many-tongued; so that, from that time forth, they could no longer understand each other, by reason of the diversity in the dialects, into which the one tongue, once common to all, was divided." (from De confusioe de Ling., folio 1640 ed.); 2. The "known law of Providence of the economy of miracles" whereby God would not have deversified the language any more than was necessary for His purpose; 3. A British and Foreign Medical Review (no. xlviii., p. 479) which stated that "any two barbarous languages are so pervaded by a sameness of character as to bear witness to the identity of their internal source."

Once he had established that all languages were derived from dialects of the one original--so that the Hebrew people could simply adopt the one they happened to meet in Egypt and carry it, with variations, in their wanderings in Sinai--Forster believed that "the historical authority, the literal fidelity, the infallible exactness, of the Gospel genealogies" (II, p.v) had been upheld and neither Egyptologists nor Assyriologists could find anything which disagreed with Biblical records. Further, he assumed that a study of the dialects found near the supposed site of the Tower of Babel would allow one to reconstruct the original language. The result would "gloriously vindicate the literal fidelity of the books of Moses, and the historical exactness of all that purports to be historical in 'THE SCRIPTURES OF TRUTH'" (III, p. 8).

He had yet one difficulty to overcome. Since the language which he had discovered to be that of the wandering Hebrews at Sinai had no real similarities to the Hebrew in which the scriptures were written, he had to suppose a rapid change before Moses wrote the Pentatuch. But this was not difficult of solution: "The answer seems easy and natural. The scriptural Hebrew would appear to have been first imported to Moses by Jehovah himself, upon the two tablets of Commandments, and at the giving of the Law from Mount Sinai. . . . And as, at Babel Almighty God interposed miraculously, by diversity of language, to disperse mankind; so, by strict analogy, after the Exode, we might again expect Him to interpose, by peculiarity of language, to insulate His people Israel." (I, p. 77) There is even a trace of the old worship of Hebrew as a holy language in Forster's further conclusion about why God had decided to peculiarize Hebrew. Hebrew "may be regarded as a pure language or idiom revealed from Heaven, less simple, because more regularly constructed, than any of the primeval tongues; in order that no tongue polluted by heathen profligacy or idolitry might profane, by becoming their receptacles, the lively oracles of God." (I, p. 78).

Forster's work must not be taken, by any means, as "typical" of the age in which he wrote; but his work is rather the height to which the absurdities of clinging to the Tower of Babel theory could take a man determined to demonstrate the "historical truth" of the Bible. He believed absolutely in all the assumptions held at the beginning of the century: Moses wrote the Pentatuch in a language given to him by God; all the facts in the scriptures were absolutely factual, especially the story of the Tower of Babel; therefore, it was certain that there was one primeval language and it was only a matter of time until that language could be reconstructed.

While such people as Wall and Forster were looking for the primeval language, they were ignoring all the other languages of the world than those which could be traced to a Semetic origin. In the meantime the discovery and study of Sanskrit had provided a basis for the comparative study of the Indo-European languages and the differentiation of those languages from the Semetic. Early in the century, the major problem had been to reconcile the then-recognized differences between the Hebrew and the Greek. Gerard's simple answer was that "The Greek language was ultimately derived from the same source, having taken its rise from some of the Oriental dialects used by the colonies which peopled Greece; but . . . it underwent so great alterations as to become, in time, a very dissimilar language."²³

With the discovery of Sanskrit, however, it came to be recognized that the "oriental" and "arian" languages were too dissimilar for such a simple differentiation. Still those who wished to support the one-origin theory were not to be persuaded of any other view, as can be seen in B. Atkinson's book on the origin of languages. He asserted that "the Hebrew was the primary stock whence all language were derived"; that Sanskrit was "a dialect of the Hebrew"; and that "the manuscripts found with mummies agree precisely with the Chinese version of the Psalms of David."²⁴ The absurdity of such statements in 1857 is equalled only by Gyll's Tractate.

Gyll's book seems today a satire on all that could be wrongly assumed by a philologist in the mid-nineteenth century; yet it is a prime example of the state of confusion caused by the assumptions of the divine-origin

²³Gerard, Biblical Criticism, p. 27.

²⁴B. Atkinson, The Triumph of Truth, or a Popular Lecture on the Origin of Languages (Melbourne, 1857). Cited by White, Warfare, p. 202.

school. Gyll

affirms that what Moses wrote was the same that Adam wrote and spoke, and that the tongue was given to our first parent by a beneficent Creator, when he breathed life into him and made him at once a reasoning and a speaking animal. In which it seems to me there is a Trinity, for man is composed of soul, life and matter, analogous to the hypostatic union.

This language was given by degrees, and so continued till the confusion of tongues. From this source came those which are sister dialects, Samaritan, Chaldee, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic and Egyptian--the Hebrew being superior in simplicity and dignity. Now the antediluvian tongue lasted 1656 years, unimpaired, for Gen. xi tells us, "That the whole earth was of one language and of one speech," so that not even a dialect existed. The longevity of the Patriarchs contributed to this end, for Adam lived to the 10th century and the flood was in the 17th.

The Arabs, and so do the Chinese claim priority of antiquity, but of course it is not to be entertained. Noah taught his descendants his matricular tongue, and this probably did Abraham speak during his sojourn at Ur in Chaldaea. The confusion was in the days of Pelag, and Abraham was forty-eight years old then.

.....

In Chaldean, a derivative from Hebrew, the two tablets were written with the finger of God, and the books of Moses were inspired by God. . . . It is credible, then, that the Jews kept their language and their letters as they did their precepts and ritual.

It is probable, too, that Adam invented letters as indispensable to a high social condition, and that there was no alteration in them . . . and that the noble, majestic square letters were the same, as those now found in the Law and Prophets.²⁵

Such was the sad state of affairs in 1859 in the world of English philology. It is no wonder that White, in surveying the situation from the vantage-point of 1900, declared: "In England the admission of the new current of thought from Germany and Holland was apparently impossible. The traditional system of biblical interpretation seemed established on British soil forever." (p. 333)

The destructive influence of the theories of one origin was visible in such studies as that by Garnett where the assumption was that all lan-

²⁵Treatate, p. 171-172. See above, n. 8, p. 5.

guages should be related in some way. Garnett thought that "When we find in Sanscrit or any similar language a termination potentially equivalent to a prefix in a Semitic tongue, or to a significant postfix in a Tartarian or American one, there is at least an ostensible ground for inquiring whether all may not virtually be different shapes of the same thing."²⁶

With this sort of reasoning passing for learning, B. W. Dwight was perhaps justified in issuing a last triumphant statement before the downfall of the Tower of Babel theory was well-begun. In 1860, he declared from America:

in the eighteenth century much effort and learning were expended by scholars . . . in the attempt to discover sure proofs of the confusion of tongues and of peoples, by the dispersion at Babel.

As Infidels also have sought to make each one of the natural sciences in their turn, when they first began to make any clear utterances of their own, bring in their testimony against the Scriptures, so too in philology they hoped to find a victorious enemy to Christianity. But Chronology, Ethnography and Etymology have all tortured in vain, to make them contradict the Mosaic accounts of the early history of man.²⁷

²⁶The Rev. Richard Garnett, "On the Origin and Import of the Gene-tive Case," Philological Soc. Trans., II, no. 39 (1845), p. 165.

²⁷B. W. Dwight, Modern Philology (New York, 1860), p. 198.

II. The Triumph of the Natural-Growth Theory

When men out of the earth of old
 A dumb and beastly vermin crawled;
 For acorns, first, and holes of shelter,
 They tooth and nail, and helter skelter
 Fought fist to fist; then with a club
 Each learned his brother brute to drub;
 Till, more experienced grown, these cattle
 Forged fit accoutrements for battle.
 At last (Lucretius says and Creech)
 They set their wits to work on speech:
 And that their thoughts might all have marks
 To make them known, these learned clerks
 Left off the trade of cracking crowns,
 And manufactured verbs and nouns.

--James Beattie, The Theory of Language¹

Beattie's satirical comment demonstrates the other side of a parallel development in the field of philology. While on the one hand there had been considerable study and speculation about the origin and development of written alphabets, there had also been, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a beginning in the speculation about the origin and diversification of speech itself. Those who had confined themselves to a study of written language could, however dubiously, insist upon a strictly literal interpretation of the Tower of Babel theory of language. Since the phonetic alphabets of the world could all be traced in some manner to the Semetic and thence to the Egyptian and Assyrian alphabets, it was still plausible to assume that there was one primeval language that had simply been divided once and developed into all the other languages.²

¹London, 1788, p. 101. Cited by White, Warfare, p. 198.

²It was harder to account for the American languages by this means, but some attempted to explain that the separation at the Tower also meant the separation of the American continents from Europe and Africa. White cited two such theories--Lord Nelme, The Origin and Elements of Language (London, 1772), pp. 85-100, and G. C. Knyser, Ueber die Ursprache . . . der Menschlichen Abstammen (Erlangen, 1940), p. 112--in his discussion, p. 200.

However, whenever theories about the origin of spoken language were considered, those who did not believe in a special creation of language were hampered by the consideration that if God had not created speech, some persons must have invented it. At the beginning of the century, few even considered the real possibility of a gradual evolvement--the earth wasn't old enough and, after all, Adam had to have some sort of language.

Romanes summed up the problem faced by the earlier students of languages:

It was a moot question whether the faculty of speech had its origin in Divine inspiration or in human invention. So long as the question touching the origin of language was supposed to be restricted to one or other of these alternatives, the special creationists in this department of thought may be regarded as having had the best of the argument. And this for the following reasons. Their opponents, for the most part, were unfairly handicapped by a general assumption of special creation as regards the origin of man, and also by a general belief in the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel. The theory of evolution having been as yet unformulated, there was an antecedent presumption in favor of the divine origin of speech, since it appeared in the last degree improbable that Adam and Eve should have been created "with full-summoned powers" of intellect, without the means of communicating their ideas to one another. And even where scientific investigators were not expressly dominated by acceptance of the biblical cosmology, many of them were nevertheless implicitly influenced by it, to the extent of supposing that if language were not the result of direct inspiration, it can only have been the result of deliberate invention.³

This is not to say that several philologists had not already begun to develop a theory of the natural growth of language. Romanes lists several who had approached such a theory, some quite early. But most of these were Germans--Herder, Schlegel, Bopp, Humboldt, Grimm, and Pott. Only two were English--Monboddo and Sir William Jones, the first not much noted among other philologists and the second not noted for his theory of origins.⁴

³George John Romanes, Mental Evolution in Man. Origin of the Human Faculty (New York, 1889), p. 239-240.

⁴Listed by Romanes pp. 240-241. See above, p. 6-7 for Wm. Jones's statement on the language of Noah.

In Germany Herder had attacked the orthodox view of his age, as represented by Summilch, that language was a direct gift from God. Herder argued, in his Origin of Language (1772), that a gift from God should be logical and reasonable, yet language is chaotic and ill-arranged so that it must come from man. Yet, he said, it was not invented but sprang from an inborn need.⁵ Grimm's and Humboldt's views were similar, and the Schlegels had gone so far as to propose that the diversity of linguistic structure pointed to different beginnings, in different places and at different times, for the three groups of language--those that were non-grammatical, those with affixes, and those with inflections.⁶ But these scholars were handicapped by a restricted time period, considering as they did that the world was only 6000 years old, and by a general belief that Hebrew and the oriental languages were the primitive and original ones.

The English speculators upon natural origins of language were likewise handicapped by presuppositions of time and the acceptance of a possibility of divine intervention. The 1859 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica article "Language" demonstrated the mixture of opinion. The author stated in the original article that on the question of how language originated "only two opinions can possibly be formed. Either languages must have been originally revealed from heaven, or it must be the fruit of human invention" (XIII, p. 185). But he gave Lord Monboddo's opinion that the first sounds were natural cries for help or joint work.⁷ This author,

⁵Otto Jespersen, Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin (New York, 1925), p. 38.

⁶See Jespersen, p. 61 for Grimm; p. 59, Humboldt; p. 35, the Schlegels.

⁷P. 186. Citation from Origin and Progress of Language, 6 vols. (London, 1773-92).

after giving reasons for both theories of language origin, supported the human-invention side. His objection to the divine inspirations theory was much like Herder's: "If the first language was communicated by inspiration, it must have been perfect, and held in reverence by those who spake it. . . . But a vast variety of languages have prevailed . . . and some of these which remain are known to be very imperfect." (p. 187) But Latham, in his notes to the original article felt called upon to discountenance the divine-origin theory altogether: "We do not assert, because we could have nothing like evidence for such an assertion, that the Deity did not originally bestow on man the gift of speech; but we think, with Lord Monboddo, and many others that if such a boon ever was conferred, it must, in the revolutions and calamities that have befallen the human race, inevitably have been lost; and therefore . . . the art of speech is one which man is capable of attaining to, independently of supernatural aid." (p. 188)

The answer, for the first writer, was that nothing had been given by God except the faculty of speech and some elements (perhaps roots) of language. With these gifts, man could develop language independently. Latham considered it necessary to postulate separate origins of languages as well, because if languages had been developed from one source they "ought, by hypothesis to graduate into each other more than they do. In order to account for the existing lines of demarcation, which are broad and definite, we must bear in mind a fresh phenomenon, viz. the spread of one dialect at the expense of others, a fact which obliterates intermediate forms, and brings extreme ones into geographical juxtaposition." (p. 187)

Latham had done more than postulate human origin of language; he had anticipated Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest" with that statement. It is not hard to see that the sciences of biology and linguistics

would soon join forces in support of the natural-origin of languages. With little trouble many could see how impossible it was to hold to the strict interpretation of the Tower of Babel incident when faced with the fact of gradual development of language.

But such theories as Latham's were still unacceptable to many of the philologists who were holding onto the "scriptural truth" about language. The American, B. D. Dwight is one case in point. He said that man does not possess the inventive powers to create a language: "A signal proof of the smallness of man's inventive powers in the department of language occurs in the fact, that even our low vulgar words, which never creep into a dictionary upon any page, that has light and beauty enough in it to deserve a day's continuance in any place of honor: words, which, at first thought one would suppose must be the sly product of English depravity; are yet thousands of years old."⁸

To Dwight, the theory of natural development is likewise false because

That same benignant Father of mankind, who always works a miracle when it is demanded . . . who confounded the speech of those who were building the tower of Babel: who wrote with his own finger on the tables of stone: who inspired prophets and apostles to speak unto all men: . . . He surely would not leave Adam at the outset to himself, as a poor, ignorant, helpless being, to grope from one unavoidable mistake into another, in respect to the very simplicities of life, and, when accompanied by his mate made for high companionship and discourse with him, to eke out by slow degrees, in a few unformed and broken syllables, a poor pitiable intercourse, but little better than the mute association of two animals together. (p. 171)

The third possibility, that of the divine origin of language, Dwight held to, with "moral and intellectual satisfaction."

Dwight's statements might seem to place him in the same category with Gyll (see above, p. 16), but there is one important difference. Dwight

⁸ Modern Philology, p. 177.

was not so much concerned to prove a common origin of alphabets, but a common origin of speech. In this respect Gyll's Tractate is a reversion to the first half of the century when the debate was concerned with alphabets and grammatical systems. Dwight's book, on the other hand, faced the newer problem of discovering the origin of speech sounds. But Dwight still faced the need to provide an interpretation of contemporary studies that was "morally satisfying."

As Donaldson said, "The comparative philologist not only undertakes to prove that mankind, now dispersed over the face of the earth, were at one time a united family; but he is enabled, by an examination of the common elements of language, to ascertain the nature of the civilization which men enjoyed."⁹ Dwight accepted such a moral function for philology and set out to show that "nations and tribes that have no features physical, intellectual, or spiritual in common, are yet found, by a comparison of their languages, to be bound closely together in the bonds of a common primeval brotherhood. Every new discovery in philology reveals new and wider connections between them, and harmonizes the voice of history with that of the scriptures." (p. 162)

To harmonize "the voice of history with that of the scriptures"--a project that stood behind so much distorted history--was yet the determined effort of some philologists. Not until after the acceptance of the idea of natural growth in languages was there a determined effort to make the voice of the scriptures harmonize with that of history. That new direction was taken in 1860 when, upon the heels of the new Biblical criticism, F. W. Farrar was to turn the statement around: "the confusion of tongues

⁹"Philology," Ency. Brit., XVII, p. 537.

must necessarily be attributed to the will of God according to a theological point of view, but according to the truth of history it is the work of man.¹⁰ Farrar called the attempts to interpret the Bible literally in the matter of language, or in any other respect, "petty human schemes of interpretation," and said that the Biblical writers had been speaking in "oriental poetic fashion" when they told the stories.¹¹ In this explanation he was probably influenced by Ernest Renan's De l'Origine du Langage upon which his own Origin of Language was based. Renan had said: "Les Hebreux qui, parmi les peuples de l'antiquite furent en possession des idees plus entendues sur l'histoire generale du monde, eurent le vague sentiment de ce fait. [that the number of mother tongues would have to be considerable] Le mythe de la tour de Babel semble etre en partie le resultat d'un effort pour concilier la diversite des langues avec l' unite primitive de l'espece humaine, dogme essentiellement lie au monotheisme semitique."¹²

With such an explanation for the Biblical story of Babel, Farrar felt that he could reconcile the difficulties of accepting language as a gift of God while believing that the philologists who postulated a human origin for languages were correct. He refuted the direct revelation theory in much the same manner that Herder and others had (see above, p. 21), by saying: "The whole character of human speech, its indirect and imperfect methods, its distant metaphoric approximations, its traceable growth and decay . . . furnish us at once with a decisive criterion of its human origin. An in-

¹⁰Frederic W. Farrar, An Essay on the Origin of Language (London, 1860), n., p. 27.

¹¹Chapters on Language in Language and Languages (London, 1873), p. 10.

¹²Second ed., (Paris, 1858), n. 1, p. 108.

vention which, in spite of all its power and beauty, is essentially imperfect, could not have come direct from God." (p. 4)

Yet Farrar, unlike many who immediately seized upon the Darwinian ideas when they appeared, could not bring himself to state a purely naturalistic theory for language origin. His explanation was that language was indeed a gift from God, but a very indirect gift: "God who was the artificer alike of the intelligence, of the voice, and of the tongue, gave to man, with those three gifts, the power of constructing a language for himself."¹³ His idea--the onomatopoeic theory, or the "bow-wow" theory as Müller was to call it--postulated that man learned to speak from imitating the sounds of nature which God had so beneficently provided for him.

The influence of Darwin was being felt, however much he disclaimed it, upon the Rev. Farrar.¹⁴ Even in explaining his own ideas about the development of onomatopoeic sounds, he found himself using a metaphor from evolution theory: "we shall see that these sounds, raw and vulgar as they may originally have been, were the natural word-cells in which thought was quickened and developed into perfect speech." Farrar noted that "the prominence recently given to Mr. Darwin's theories naturally suggests this metaphor."¹⁵

Other philologists saw no need to disclaim a connection with Darwin, however. The analogy between the origin and development of biological species and the same process in language was immediately welcomed by many who before had had no clear basis for their ideas. Some went on to show

¹³Chapters, p. 47.

¹⁴He rejected Darwin on the ground of "fixity of species." See Chapters, p. 42.

¹⁵P. 133, n. 1.

that the findings in language supported Mr. Darwin's thesis. Such a one was Dr. C. Lottner. In a paper read before the Philological Society on Feb. 9, 1860, he maintained that the growth of the Semitic family of languages showed that the Negro (Saho and Galla) and the Semitic (Berber and Egyptian) races had been separated at an early stage and had developed independently--just as Darwin had indicated.¹⁶

Even though the opinion differed over whether any analogy could be clearly drawn between his own evolution theory and theories of the growth of language, Darwin himself clearly saw a connection by the time he published The Descent of Man in 1870. Stating that "no philologist now supposes that any language has been deliberately invented," he went on to show the clear analogy of growth of language and growth of the human species. He said that biologists do not consider an animal more perfect than another merely because of its complexity of parts. Therefore the philologist ought not to do so either: "the most symmetrical and complex ought not to be ranked above irregular, abbreviated, and bastardized languages."¹⁷ Such a conclusion clearly repudiated a maxim of the divine-origin school--that the oldest languages were the most simple and irregular, and if any such languages were complex and regular, they must have been formed by God. Darwin stated it for all to see: "the extremely complex and regular construction

¹⁶"On Sisterfamilies of Language," Phil. Soc. Trans. 1860-61. It is interesting, as a perspective upon the extremes of thought at this time, that Lottner argued, in the same article, that Semitic was not related to "Indo-German" as Bunsen and Schwartz had maintained. His comment was: "On the contrary, whatever may be a man's belief concerning the historical unity of all languages, let it be remembered that scientific enquiry is unable to countenance it in any way." It was not until Dec. 13 of that same year that the Philological Society was presented with a copy of Gyll's Tractate in which Hebrew was still claimed as the original language.

¹⁷Second ed. (New York, 1901), p. 121, 128.

of many barbarous languages is no proof that they owe their origin to a special act of creation." (p. 128)

The Darwinian influence in the field of philology was so strongly felt by 1896 that the American Dwight Whitney could assert:

If the Darwinian theory is true, and man a development out of some lower animal, it is, at any rate, conceded that the last and nearest transition-forms have perished . . . if they could be restored, we should find the transition-forms toward our speech to be . . . an inferior system of conventional signs, in tone, gesture, and grimace.

As between the three natural means of expression just mentioned, it is simply by a kind of process of natural selection and survival of the fittest that the voice has gained the upper hand.¹⁸

Whitney began his statement with "if the Darwinian theory is true," but it is clear that he thought it true and saw that speculation about the origin of language must concentrate upon the factors which would lead the ape-man to develop some sort of speech. He is a world apart from those who believed in an Adam formed with full-summoned powers; the Tower of Babel theory was certainly dead.

Darwin should not be given all the credit for the emergence of the new comparative linguistics, however. Another very important factor was the development of Biblical "higher criticism" in England. The singular work in that area was a collection called Essays and Reviews, because of the rousing squabble it caused (similar to the argument over Darwin and involving some of the same people).¹⁹

¹⁸ The Life and Growth of Language (New York, 1896), p. 291.

¹⁹ See White, Warfare, pp. 343-348. He reports the interesting connection: "A meeting of clergy and laity having been held at Oxford in the matter of electing a Professor of Sanskrit, the older orthodox party--having made every effort to defeat the eminent scholar Max Müller . . . found relief after their defeat in new denunciations of Essays and Reviews (p. 343).

The impetus for the new criticism of the Biblical texts had come from the same source as that for a new look at the comparisons of language--the discoveries in Assyria (Babylon). Those involved in the study of the written texts found in that area had discovered that many of the things long thought to have been revealed directly to the Biblical writers were instead adaptations of Babylonian myths. The most notable was George Smith's discovery, in 1874, of the Gilgamesh legend which corresponded with the Biblical account of the deluge of Noah. But the true history of the Babel story was being uncovered too.

The first development was the doubt about the site of the Tower. Birs-Nimroud had long been thought to be the ruin of that famous tower, and in 1876 one hopeful writer declared: "Of its identity with the Tower of Babel there is scarcely ground for a reasonable doubt."²⁰ There was doubt, however, and the doubt about the authenticity of an such real place grew when it was discovered that "the etymology [of the word Babel, as given in Gen. 11] was not accepted by the Babylonians themselves, who wrote the word in a way which shows that they considered it to mean, 'the Gate of God' . . . we may reconcile the two by supposing . . . that the name was first given in scorn, and that afterwards a better meaning was found for it."²¹

In 1894 Sayce's The "Higher Criticism" and the Verdict of the Monuments at last ushered out the century or more of speculation about that venerable structure. Sayce recounted: "The Babylonian version of the Tower of Babel has not yet been discovered. But we know that the frag-

²⁰ John P. Newman, The Thrones and Palaces of Babylon and Ninevah (New York, 1876), p. 159.

²¹ George Rawlinson, Egypt and Babylon from Sacred and Profane Sources (New York, 1885), p. 12.

ments have once existed. Mr. George Smith found the fragments of a tablet in which references are made to it." Then he explained how the myth of the confusion of tongues had developed:

Here [in Babylon] . . . where the cultured classes had dreamed of a universal language, and where in actual fact almost as many languages were spoken as are spoken in Constantinople today, it was natural that belief should be strong in a primeval confusion of tongues.

The Hebrew writer found support for this view in an etymology furnished by his own language. He plays upon the name Bab-ili "the Gate of the god" and connects it with the Hebrew balbel "to confound." But the root is not met with in Babylonian, and we may therefore infer that the etymology is of Palestinian origin.²²

By the end of the century, the issue was no longer the reconciling of philological studies with the Biblical accounts. The concern was, instead, to find the origin of the myths, including that of the Tower of Babel, through philological studies. The old stumbling blocks of the Biblical accounts had been cleared away and comparative linguistics was on sure footing.

The 1860's had seen the comment from Max Müller that "the great controversies about the great problems have not yet subsided. The questions whether language is a work of nature or of art, whether languages had one or many beginnings, whether they can be classified in families or no, are constantly starting up, and scholars, even while engaged in the most minute enquiries,—while carrying brick and mortar to build the walls of their new science,—must have their sword girded by their side, always ready to meet the enemy."²³ At the end of the century the enemy had been met and conquered. It was no longer necessary to carry swords.

²²London, p. 153.

²³Lectures on the Science of Language, 2nd ser. (New York, n.d. [for 1863]), p. 14.

But philologists--or linguists as they were beginning to be called--could hardly be asked to become common workmen. Müller completed his statement: "This no doubt may be tedious, but it leads us to examine carefully the ground on which we take our stand, and keeps us alive, even while analysing mere prefixes and suffixes, to the grandeur and sacredness of the issues that depend on these minutiae." Such a conception of purpose did indeed keep the philologists of the nineteenth century alive--perhaps more alive than some of the purely scientific linguists of the twentieth century. But, after all, there are still those who find, even in 1958, that "inexhaustible voice reverberating down the ages" which claims Adam as the first great linguist.

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THE END

FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL TO COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

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FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL TO COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, philologists in England still held several fallacies which were related to the Biblical statements on language. A few considered Hebrew to be the original language, but most had discarded that idea in the face of evidence from Egyptian hieroglyphics and the study of other languages.

However, most believed in a literal interpretation of the Biblical statement that the earth had been of one language at the time of Noah, and that the one primeval language had been divided at the Tower of Babel by the direct intervention of God. In addition, most believed that language had been revealed to Adam at his creation--some believed he had been taught how to speak, or even to write, by God; others, that Adam had invented language and/or the alphabet for himself.

Several attempts were made to twist the facts of language in such a manner that Biblical literalism would be supported. One of these, by Charles W. Wall, was meant to prove that Moses had received the first phonetic alphabet from God on Mt. Sinai. His theory was that man was capable of inventing the hieroglyphic picture-writing, but was incapable of further invention without heavenly aid. Another attempt was made to prove the Tower of Babel Story to be true by tracing the Hebrew peoples back to Babylon from Sinai and Egypt. If he could do this, presumably Charles Forster should have been able to find the one original. At least he thought that he was only one step from the one primeval language.

In the meantime the really competent philologists were developing a theory of the natural origin and development of languages. But most of these were in Germany, not England. Since the study of philology was so intimately connected with the church, most philologists in England were hampered in a clear understanding of the growth of language by the Biblical cosmology and the a priori acceptance of the incident at Babel.

However, in 1860-1870 several developments took place in England which destroyed the old theories about the Tower of Babel. Darwin's theories destroyed the objection that man could not have formed a language for himself. Philologists began to apply a form of evolutionary theory to the origin and development of language, but it took another development to demolish completely the theological viewpoints centering around the Tower of Babel story. This development was the coming of Biblical "higher criticism" to England. With the advent of this higher criticism, the story of Babel began to take its place with the other myths adopted from Babylonian mythology. At last the story of the famous Tower could be explained as a myth developed out of the need to explain a natural phenomenon, and not as a true historical event.

With the final confirmation of the Babel story's mythological character, philology in England was on a firmer ground in its speculation about ultimate origins and the nature of the differentiation of languages.